

CBS EVENING NEWS

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RATHER: Fresh reports tonight that Konstantin Chernenko, top leader of the Soviet Union, is ill. The 72-year-old Chernenko has been in office only three months, succeeding the late Yuri Andropov, who died at age 69. State Department correspondent Bill McLaughlin has been checking these news reports of Chernenko's illness.

MCLAUGHLIN: Well, Dan, there's certainly no indication that Chernenko is not completely in charge of the Soviet Union, but intelligence sources do know he has emphysema, a lung disease, and it may be getting worse. An indication of that may have come yesterday. Sources in Moscow saw him as he welcomed the Spanish king and queen. He had to be helped to meet them by two body guards, who actually supported him, and during the toasts, his voice faltered and his hands shook. Today again, Chernenko looked quite ill as he welcomed Portuguese Communist leaders.

RATHER: There's no indication--now I want to emphasize this or at least get it clear--there's no indication that Chernenko's grip on the leadership of the Soviet Union is loosening because of what appears to be this worsening of his illness we've known about for some time.

MCLAUGHLIN: No, not at all, Dan, but certainly his health does seem to be deteriorating from what we can see, the physical evidence.

RATHER: Thank you very much, Bill McLaughlin, in Washington.